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Presentation Transcript
Parenting for Faith – Affirmation
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Hi everybody. Welcome to Albuquerque, New Mexico. We're finishing a series about how to pass faith on to our children. It's called *Parenting for Faith*. We're on the seventh and final presentation in that series. This one is called *Affirmation*.

As we talk about this, it's not as much about affirming our children as it is about helping them to understand that they're affirmed by God. Every child *is* a child of God. Each one of them has a gift from God. Each one has a purpose. Each one has capabilities. Each one has a role in the plan of God. Each one is special. Today's presentation is about helping them *find* all of these things and, eventually, fulfill their destiny with God.

How would we like to be able to do that for your children? Would you like to be used of God for that purpose in their lives? Well we're going to learn about God's affirming spirit and how to tap into it with our kids. We're going to get into that right now.

The first thing we're going to talk about is how to help children see what is special in themselves. In the independent Church of God and all the Churches of God, we've never really focused on this that much. So, even as adults, we don't know what God has given us that we can use to help other people. So this is important.

I was working with a twelve-year-old girl once who lost her father many years earlier. That experience shattered this child. She was having a recurring nightmare. She never got permission from her father to be fully female. That's where girls get that. It's not from mother. And, as she approached puberty, she was acting out. She was depressed. She was angry. She was negative. She would always make comments that were self-downing. She talked a lot about how ugly she was. But, really, she was quite beautiful. She just didn't know how to groom herself very well. Over the next few months – after I met her – I began – when she would complain about how people didn't like her – I would say things like, “That's funny. I always look forward to you coming in here to see me. You're so much fun!” She'd say things like, “I'm built like a stork.” And I would say, “Well, you're tall and slender and elegant. And I love your perfectly straight, bright, white teeth! When you smile my whole office lights up. It's just dazzling! And your hair...you know, all

those boys at school, probably, really like your hair. It's so long and beautiful. You ought to try wearing it down more." She'd say, "Ah, it's too much trouble."

She was having this recurring nightmare about a monster that killed one of her friends. I think that was really about the loss of her father. So we processed that in one session with EMDR and after that, her mood started to lift gradually and to brighten. She started smiling more. She came to my office with her hair down and actually combed. It looked great. She started dressing better. Pretty soon she was reporting that she had a secret admirer who was leaving little stuffed animals at her locker. Once she got rid of that negative cloud around her, she started drawing people in.

One day I suggested that, with her long, graceful build, she might be a fast runner. So pretty soon she was on the track and anchoring the 4 x 100. She was the fastest girl in the school and she was just a seventh grader.

Because I'd spent a lot of time comforting her as she cried out her sorrow about her father, what I thought about her became really important to her. Isn't that interesting – how that works? So a few simple compliments would rocket her into a new area where she could excel. She was grooming herself better, smiling more, easing up on herself, began to attract more peers. Before long she had a fairly large circle of friends. All that happened over three months. Kids can change so fast. One day she burst into my office all excited, and said, "Guess what! I got my period!" Whoa! To us, that might sound like too much information, but to put that in context, what that really is about is that, at some level, she knew that part of our work together was about me affirming her as a female. I think she had a pretty healthy outlook on that. It was like a milestone to her, I think.

It's amazing what kids know at different levels of understanding. And she was learning that she could do things that she didn't think she could do, and that she had capabilities she had never realized. And a lot of that came from just some affirmative statements that I made in pointing out some of those things.

So, children learn about their special gifts from other people – not so much from themselves. So we can all play a part in helping people learn – children, especially – what they can do well. Could you help your child in your home or a child in your congregation see what's special about them? Well, if we'll just take the time to think about that, some times we can. Helping kids learn what's special about them.

And then another thing that I like to do is to point out when children have grown. I remember, when I was in the seventh grade, we played on a playground and we'd play softball after school. I wasn't that good of a hitter. Then the first time softball season started up, when we were in the eighth grade, I hit about four homeruns over that fence that I could never make. I had no idea that I had gotten so much better at softball just by growing for a year. Kids are like that in *everything* – not just physical things.

I was working with another child who was very narrow in her interests. Her mom and I would brainstorm about what we could do to kind of expand her horizons a little bit. She

was not interested in school; didn't like sports; didn't like art; didn't like reading. All she liked to do was text and talk to her friends on the phone. She was just a total social creature. But she did have a Facebook page and no computer, so part of her sessions, I would let her work on the computer in my office and she would draw me into that work. She always wanted me to sit beside her as she added pictures of her friends and changed her profile. She would always ask me what I thought she should do with this or that. I would always defer back to her. Then, when she'd make a choice, I would approve of her choices and tell her that her page was really cool, and that she had a talent for that, tell her that I could see real growth in her artistic ability and her verbal skills to explain what she was doing, that she was making really good choices about the pictures she put on her site. I don't know if you all realize what's going on out there right now, but a lot of these teenage girls put the most indiscreet pictures of themselves on their Websites. This girl doesn't. She always wants to know if I think it's a good picture or not – trying very hard to do the right thing. So I try to point out to her how good she is at something and that's she's growing and changing. Since I've been with her for awhile, I point out the things that she's doing now that she couldn't do a year ago. That helps her.

So kids don't see their own areas of growth until it's pointed out to them. That is affirming and encouraging. It gives them confidence to reach out and try new things. What growth has your child made lately that you can point to and encourage them with?

The next thing...I've just called this *moments of growth*. And this example is not about a child. It's about a young adult. But the older I get, the more like a child some of these young adults seem to me. I don't mean that in a negative or put-down kind of way. It's just that when you're sixty-four, somebody that is twenty-five – and you have kids that are forty – they seem young! So this person is a young woman and suffering severe anxiety. I was concerned at first that she wouldn't be able to stick with therapy because she was so anxious, and she had so many fears, and believed that she was not capable of accomplishing anything – also, because anxiety has some very painful stuff, in most cases, so it's hard for people to go to those painful places and do that work.

She was trying to break up with her boyfriend, but she couldn't find the courage to do that. He would always talk her out of it. Even though she knew the relationship wasn't doing either one of them any good, she would succumb and let him convince her it was okay. So we started doing some EMDR around that issue just to get her calmed down enough so she could work on what was really causing her problems. I asked her, what was it about this relationship that bothered her the most? And she said, "Well, we're both wasting time." So even at twenty-five, that biological clock starts ticking. She's got kids to have, a husband to find and all that. So we started with that and it quickly went along to a string of self-deprecating thoughts like, "I'm a loser. I'm weak. I'm wishy-washy. I have no character, no strength. I can't tell people what I want. Can't stick to my resolve." And in the middle of all this, she stopped – she was crying – and said, "I don't think this is working. It's like I'm beating myself up. I say this stuff to myself all the time." So I gave her some tissues, and I said, "You know, these are the thoughts that are making you anxious. And I know it feels bad to go through these things, but you won't be thinking these things anymore." And a week later she came back and told me that she hadn't

caught herself thinking weak thoughts all week. I just wish everybody could have seen the look on her face. She was *so* happy! It was like, “Oh, ho! I didn’t know I could do that!” So, in a week, she found the courage to tell her boyfriend that it was over. She actually laughed a little bit, which was the first time *that* ever happened in my office with her. We had a laugh and kind of celebrated her growth.

I asked her to scan down – and this is the part that really blew me away – to scan down from the top of her head to see if she found any tension in her body anywhere. She had said that she always feels this tightness in her chest. She said, “It’s *always* there.” So I explained to her that that feeling doesn’t go away because it’s an *old* feeling – from infancy. She just spontaneously blurted out that her older sister told her some time ago that, when she was a little toddler, her mother would leave her in the crib for hours and hours and not attend to her, and that she would stand up and cry for help and attention, and her sister – who wasn’t that much older – I think maybe five years – would hold her hand in an effort to try to comfort her little sister. So she was able to draw up that story of that event – and the pictures of abandonment that she was feeling – which, for her, really is the source of her trouble, I think. So I pointed this out, and I told her that her ability to access this material so easily means that she’s going to be able to do this work and feel a lot better way sooner than I thought. She’s been so anxious about her ability to do this. People have sort of a fear of the fear sometimes. So she was relieved. This incredible moment of growth had helped her to move forward and to believe that she could do the work.

The principle here is that our children make spurts of growth. They kind of draw strength from wellsprings within them. I believe that God puts that capability within us. When this happens and when someone affirms that and points that out to them, it’s extremely encouraging. If you think that you have a really bad problem and it’s going to take years to get over, and then you just do about five years work in one week, it *feels* good. So, do your children have any hidden springs of strength? It’s good to look for them and watch for those moments of change that take place, so that we can buoy them up with them, and help them, and encourage them to go forward.

The fourth area I want to talk about is *when children test us*. I had a boy one time. He was a Goth boy. He was fourteen and he was six-foot-two. And he had hair that came down to his mouth and he’d wear it like this, you know – it would cover up one eye for sure, and half of the other one, and his nose and everything. He had chains and all that stuff. He was in the alternative school, where they put all the kids that they couldn’t control in regular school. His mother was making him come, because his mom and his dad had divorced and his dad had kind of abandoned him. He didn’t want to be there.

So his first session...he came in and he tried his best to answer my questions, but he kind of shut down after awhile. I said, “I’ll just sit her with you. I know this stuff is hard, so I’m just going to be here with you.” So we sat for twenty minutes without saying a word. When it was time to leave, I said, “You know, why don’t you...since it’s hard for you to talk, why don’t you bring something next week that will help me understand you better – hobbies, music, whatever – whatever you like.” So he brings this CD player in. First he

plays a Star Wars theme. Then he plays some real head-banger stuff. Then he plays this song that had one of the most obscene, negative first opening lines in it. It involved three people. It involved him, his girlfriend and his best friend. You can imagine what his best friend did with his girlfriend. Okay? And he's looking up from behind his hair at me while I'm listening to this song. His mother is outside listening to the song, too, thinking, "I hate that song. Why did he play.... I hope he straightens him out on that!" I said, "Well, that's a pretty interesting song you've got there." I said, "Which three of those people do you feel like?" "Hey man, it's just a song!" I said, "No, that's not how it works in here. If it comes in the room, we're talking about it. So which one of those people do you feel like?" "I guess like the girl." So he felt like the victim. So that was the *foundation* for our therapy. After six months he was back in regular school and doing better.

His mother told me that he'd been to lots of therapists, but he'd never wanted to go until he came to me. I'm not the greatest therapist in the world, but.... That was a test right there. And if I didn't pass that test, he was going to write me off, too. So kids will test you.

I had a little girl come to me the other day. She's just starting to look teenagerish. She came in my office and sat down, and she said, "Would you be disappointed in me if I wanted to have a baby?" "WHAT?!!" is what I wanted to say. But really, two things were going on there. So I said, "Well, I think what you're really asking me is, 'Will I still love you if you have a baby?'" She looked a little bit startled. Then she kind of rolled it around and goes, "Yeeaah...." I said, "Well, the answer to that question is, 'Of course I will!' But I'm really interested to know why you're thinking about having a baby." She said, "Well, I went to my sister's over the weekend, and she had some married friends over, and they had a baby, and I got to hold it. He was so cute. I just loved him. And holding him made me want to have a baby." I said, "Well, what would be good about having a baby." She said, "Well, he would *love* me." So more of what's really going on.... "Are you ready to have a baby now?" She said, "Oh no. I know I need to get older. I need to have a job. I need to be married – all of that." "So you don't mean that you're planning to get pregnant while you're in the sixth grade." She said, "Oh no. I just loved holding him." So I said, "Well, I'm not surprised that you would love to do that, because you're such a relational, loving girl. But, you know, I was reading this article just recently about girls your age who have babies, and often the babies are born dead or with disabilities, or the mother has a terrible time with the birth, because her bone structure is not developed enough for the baby to pass through. So even though some girls your age *can* get pregnant, their bodies are not ready to produce, or deliver, a healthy baby. "Oh, I know that." So I said, "So what does that point out that girls your age need to do?" She laughed, and said, "Stay away from guys!" And I added, "Staying away from being *alone* with guys – at least, for now!"

I said, "I'm really glad that you asked me that question, because it gave me a chance for me to tell you how much I care about you, and no matter what problems might come up in your life, I'm still going to love you and want to help you as you want it from me." So there was that opportunity to draw closer and communicate. But that was a test, wasn't it? It was a test to see what I could tolerate.

So the principle there is that kids will test to see if we care about them, aside from their behavior. Most of the time these tests have two messages. One is the overt message – you know, having a baby or can he tolerate this song? And the other one is, “Is he going to care about me no matter what I do?” That really is the test.

So, if we care about them, aside from their behavior, when we do that, we’re demonstrating that they are valued. And we’re also – and this is very important – modeling God’s lovingkindness for them. That’s how they learn how God feels about them.

Here’s another one that I like to think about – and that’s *names*. Children value their name. I worked with a boy whose father called him all kinds of derogatory names all his life. His father, due to his own therapy, had a change of heart and wanted to know from his son what he could change to improve his relationship with him. I was helping him create the list. The first thing that he mentioned was that his dad should stop calling him derogatory names. Of all the terrible things his father has done to him, that was the *first* thing on the list.

I always ask kids what they want me to call them. Often, what they come up with is *not* what they’re called at school or in the family. That’s because people at school or in the family don’t often *ask* them what they would like to be called. I also think this happens sometimes, because they see their first time with me as a break away from negatives of the past or a chance to be different, maybe – maybe a new beginning.

I also talk to kids about what they might want to call me. And I give them a list. I say, “Some kids have called me Bill. Some call me Mr. Bill. Some call me Mr. J. And a few have called me Mr. Jacobs. But you can call me Bill just as easily as you can call me Mr. Jacobs. I hope we can be friends. And who calls a friend Mr.? But you can decide. In here, whatever you want to call me is okay.”

So we affirm kids when they know that they’ll be treated with respect. The name they like the best will be the one that we use. We have to take the time to try to find out, though, what that name might be.

Okay. Here’s the last one. This one is about *touch*. I told you about the girl who lost her father. One day she came into my office very angry and upset – got into a fight with her sister just before they came in for counseling. The mother took the sister’s side. It was left out what she did to cause that to happen, but she took her sister’s side. So she broke down in tears at one point, and said, “I don’t belong in the family.” So she’s feeling really abandoned. Right? Of course, her father left when she was very young. So that abandonment feeling is attaching itself to the present situation. And she’s blown the present situation way out of proportion. She tends to do this quite often. She’ll come in upset about something that happened. Then the next week I’ll ask her, and she’ll say, “Oh, that’s okay. No problem. Everything worked out all right.” So she dramatizes it because she’s being triggered by that abandonment that she felt from younger on. She

was really, at this point, sobbing very hard and it was obvious that this spat had really touched that abandonment thing. So I moved over on the couch beside her, and I put my arm around her, and she just laid her head over on me, and she just – maybe for a minute or two, actually – just sobbed so hard – way harder than most of the time. When she started pulling herself together, I got up, got her some tissues, sat back down in my chair, and we had a really good session talking about what happened and exploring what it might mean, which got around to talking about dad.

The next week I took her back to that event and asked her what it was like for her to cry on my shoulder. She said, “It really helped.” And I said, “Well, I thought it might, but I was also concerned that it might make you feel more separated from your dad.” And her eyes got wide, and she said, “Oh no. I was like he was right there with me.” That doesn’t mean that every child would experience it in the same way, but I just had a sense that she needed some physical touch from me in order to do that work. She, up to that point, had always presented herself to be given a little squeeze at the end of the session. That was important to her. So I thought she could probably tolerate it. So that was very helpful to her and it was kind of like a breakthrough between her and me – to be able to talk about how really bad it was for her to lose her father.

All kids have a sense that their bodies are their own private property. We see the situation where the relatives come for Thanksgiving and the parents tell the kids to kiss everybody goodbye. And there’s always one kid that doesn’t want to kiss somebody or hug them. Well, that’s because they haven’t drawn close enough to that person, or the person hasn’t made an effort to draw close to them.

So, when a child offers you his hand, and drags you across the waiting room floor into the counseling office, that means that he feels safe with you and can’t wait to spend some time doing helpful things related to his growth and well-being. I’ve had that happen. And when a child shies away from touch, that means they don’t feel safe yet. So I can monitor all of that. When they feel safe, they’ll send a signal that touch is needed.

So, do you touch your child in a way that he or she wants to be touched? I was talking to a parent the other day who said, “My son always wants to sit by me on the couch. He wants me to put my arm around him while we watch TV. And I just to make him go, ‘Get away. Too much. Too close.’ I’m not touchy-feely like that.” Well, what’s happening there is the child is triggering his unconscious feelings from the past. And it’s preventing him from really providing his child what he needs. So parents with those issues can reduce those through therapy, or, sometimes, if it’s not too strong, just through self-management, or prayer, or meditation, or all three.

The principle there is that, when children can be touched in safe and appropriate ways, it tends to cement the relationship, affirm their worth and communicate love to them in a way that words really can’t. Children don’t...their currency is not words. It’s in eye contact, touch, unconditional regard, doing fun things – that kind of thing. So those are six principles that I use to try to affirm children. They work in the family. They work anywhere. They work at church.

Think about it. No scriptures quoted yet. Right? And yet, right down to it, about how to show Godly love to children and communicate *God's* love to them, so that they know they are loved by Him.

When Jesus was baptized by John – there's a scripture for you, right? It's in Matthew 3 – and he was about to embark on His public ministry, God came to Him and *affirmed* Him, saying, "*This is my Son, whom I love, and with Him, I am well pleased.*" God's big on affirmation. Do we do that with our children?

Well, the things we discussed today are all concrete ways we can communicate affirmation and love to children. And, in these ways, children can also learn that they are loved by God and special – that they have something to offer others, the world and to God Himself.